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TAGS: PREL PGOV BA BILAT OFFICIALS

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON NEW MINISTER OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

REF: A. 06 MANAMA 2061

1B. 06 MANAMA 2031

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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11. (C) The Ambassador December 28 called on newly appointed Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Nizar Al Baharna and discussed bilateral relations, the internal political situation in Bahrain, the National Democratic Institute project in Bahrain, UN Security Council Resolution 1737 dealing with Iran, and Bahraini detainees at Guantanamo. Per Ref B, Al Baharna replaced Dr. Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, with Abdul Ghaffar retaining his position as Minister of Information. Al Baharna received a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering from the University of Wales, UK, served as CEO of Nizar Consulting and the Technologies and Consulting Group/Middle East, and was elected second vice president of the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2005. He was a founding member of leading Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq and is the first Al Wifaq member to be a minister.

12. (C) The Ambassador emphasized that the United States and Bahrain have a very strong relationship, starting with the U.S. Navy in the 1940s and diplomatic relations since the early 1970s. The commercial side of the relationship has traditionally been weaker than other aspects, but the U.S.-Bahrain free trade agreement, which entered into force in August 2006, will help build bilateral economic relations. Al Baharna said it was very important that the FTA result in benefits for all Bahraini citizens.

13. (C) The Ambassador noted that the U.S. and Bahraini governments share an interest in promoting democratic reforms. Al Baharna said that things are progressing in Bahrain but there will always be ups and downs. The GOB wants to boost relations and trade with the United States and provide a better life for the people. He continued that Al Wifaq's participation in the elections and parliament had been a significant development. Referring to Al Wifaq's boycott of the King's address to a joint session of parliament December 15 (Ref A), he said Al Wifaq had delivered its message to the government and it was now time to get its act together. Al Wifaq has to learn to separate its interests from those of the country overall, and he commented that Al Wifaq leaders tend to see things in individual, personal terms.

14. (C) In response to Al Baharna's comment that new parliamentarians need training on best practices, the Ambassador said that the National Democratic Institute (NDI) project for Bahrain could assist. Bilateral relations had taken a blow when the NDI project director was forced out of Bahrain in May 2006. People could not understand how Bahrain, a regional leader on reform, had kicked out NDI.

Bahrainis had participated in an NDI program in Washington in November, and we were looking for ways to continue the cooperation. Al Baharna said he would help on NDI, if possible.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador briefed the Minister on UNSCR 1737, which applies sanctions on Iran. Al Baharna said that under Khatami, it had been possible to have a dialogue with Iran. With Ahmadini-Nejad, however, it was very difficult. Al Baharna raised the issue of the two remaining Bahraini detainees at Guantanamo and asked for USG support in returning them to Bahrain. He said that some deputies in parliament would focus on this situation and apply a lot of pressure on the Foreign Ministry.

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